

When a woman ran for Lake County Sheriff

by Rose Moore

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How might this matronly looking lady, Arta M. Spink, have looked in the classic sheriff uniform of yesteryear?...

I couldn't help wondering that when I first saw Arta's photo in a political ad that had run in the old Painesville Telegraph in 1924. In that year, Arta was the only female ever to run for the office of Lake County Sheriff. (The copy of the ad, with Arta's photo, had been sent to me some years ago by Ed Cunningham, a local history buff who himself had occupied the office of sheriff in Lake County from 1960 to 1988).

It would seem it must have been hard for Arta's potential voters to figure out whether she was running on her husband Ora's coattails, or whether he was running on hers. It was "two for the price of one," and more.

Her campaign literature encouraged Lake County citizens to "Vote for the Spinks"--Yes, Spinks in the plural---and she openly ran on HIS experience and promised the office would remain "under the same management," with her husband Ora as Chief Deputy.

Ora M. Spink had served as Sheriff for a total of eight years (1912 to 1914; 1914 to 1916; and 1920 to 1924). He had apparently enjoyed his rein so much that he was handing the torch to his wife Arta, who launched a strong campaign that blatantly included both of them.

Was she running because her husband was restricted from another term? Or because her husband had lost the support of their Republican party? Or simply because she believed she was the "best man for the job?" None of that has been proven; what IS

clear is that she campaigned vigorously, listing herself in campaign print as "Mrs. Ora M. Spink, who is a Republican but running on the Independent Ticket."

Arta's campaign literature stated that she and Ora had "proven as true to Republican party principles as any candidate in the field." So why did she run as an Independent, I inquired of Cunningham. "I guess she wanted all the votes---from both sides," he replied with a chuckle.

Though Arta was listed as "deputy" during her husband's terms, she actually was the jail matron. That could have been mainly bringing the meals to inmates---like "Aunt Bea" in the old TV series about Andy the Sheriff of Mayberry. But Cunningham said he thought Arta "probably knew as much about the job as Ora did."

You might think the voters were confused when the candidate listed herself not by her name, Arta M. Spink, but instead as Mrs. Ora M. Spink. Doubly so because Ora was commonly a woman's name.

But in those times, by social form and especially in print, "Mrs. Arta M. Spink" would have designated her as a divorced woman. A married or widowed woman would be commonly referred to in print by her husband's name, i.e. "Mrs. Ora M. Spink." (However, it has to be noted that in political campaigns, a woman would generally have used her own name).

Arta ran on her husband's stated record of "the greatest cooperation in the enforcement of all laws of any sheriff's administration in the history of Lake County." She promised, if she were elected, the office would be "under the same fine management."

She told the voters she and Ora had proven they would cooperate with the people of Lake County in the enforcement of Prohibition laws. In dealing that Prohibition card, she may have had her eye on the success a few years earlier of Fairport's Amy Kaukonen---a 21-year-old physician who had become the first woman mayor of that village; indeed, perhaps the first woman mayor in the U.S. Like Arta, Kaukonen had conducted her campaign with a key element of Prohibition and the promise to wage war on whiskey runners and bootleggers

A stern Arta M. Spink---or Mrs. Ora M. Spink---declared a vote for another candidate would be a vote against her and also against hers' and her husbands' principles. "Do not take the attitude that it makes no difference; it does," she warned. "Vote for the Spinks by voting for Mrs. Ora M. Spink."

Arta---Mrs. Ora M. Spink---was not elected. Was the strong vote against them a vote against Arta herself... Mrs. Ora... Ora himself... or their principles... or all of the above?

In the 170 years since the Lake County Sheriff's Dept. was established, there have been 28 sheriffs. In the 86 years since Arta M. Spink unsuccessfully sought that office, the name Spink has never again appeared on the Lake County Sheriff Dept. roster in any form or capacity.